

## Research and Analysis on Sustainable Consumption and the Economy

Report for Carlson Communications and the City of Eugene

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**Introduction:** PolicyInteractive conducted an online opinion survey about sustainability, energy, climate stability and economic issues for Carlson Communications and the City of Eugene as part of Eugene's Climate and Energy Action Plan. The online survey was designed to re-test and extend two earlier research components of the same project, those conducted by DHM Research, an Oregon opinion survey company, and Bell+Funk, a market research company.

A goal of the online surveying was to take prior findings from a statistical sample survey designed jointly by DHM & PolicyInteractive and two focus groups conducted by Bell+Funk to examine key motivators and message frames which resonate with the public toward energy, climate, sustainability and economic factors. The survey was also intended to measure the effectiveness of the consolidation of individual parts of earlier findings into a meta-communication framework for shorthand communication effectiveness.

This research component was funded by Oregon's largest charitable organization at no cost to taxpayers or utility ratepayers.

**Methodology:** Using Eugene Water & Electric Board (EWEB) and Eugene employee email address bases we invited Eugene citizens to participate in a survey accessible on the respondent's computer. This method of surveying is attractive because of its very low cost and the visual formatting supports more nuanced or thoughtful question constructions. These advantages allowed us to employ a preference ranking style on comparatively complex issues otherwise impractical in phone surveying.

A total of 692 online surveys were completed, consisting of 44 questions, and requiring an average of 13 minutes of respondent time to complete. The invitation to participate utilized two different address based sources: an EWEB general residential customer Internet email address file and a City of Eugene employee email address file. Invitations to participate were extended non-selectively to all email addresses in those files. All participants who completed the survey were included in the results excepting a small number (under ten) responses were filtered to allow one respondent per Internet email address or respondent name. Incomplete surveys were also omitted from tally results.

**Disclaimer:** Because the population sample used for these results is based on those who initially self-selected for participation rather than random selection methods, no probability of representativeness error can be calculated. All sample surveys and polls may be subject to multiple sources of error, including, but not limited to sampling error, coverage error, and

measurement error. Demographic distributions in this survey do indicate general population characteristics on selected measures (more on this below) but no statistical inference can be made as to this survey representing the general population within a specific margin of error.

**Demographic profile discussion:** Although findings are not represented to be a random statistical sample, the respondent demographics evidence broad distribution among the general citizenship when analyzed by zip code, gender, and income. A liberal response slant is present when compared to population of Oregon, but we don't have a comparable to the population of Eugene. Likewise there may be a skew toward the full time employee category as might be expected from Internet addresses representing city employees and utility customer ratepayers; as well as skewed away from younger population cohorts. Comparison of demographics from the two address files showed similar response frequencies, with the exception that the city employee base was observed to have a higher level of self-reported political conservatism than the EWEB customer base. A more extensive examination of demographics and cross-tabs on key questions is available on request.

**Findings:**

**Consume Less or Grow the Economy:** A potential controversial finding is the topic of balancing economic growth with lowering our consumption levels. This is often a germane question in sustainability, energy and economic strategies. Because of the potential for “question order influence” (the capacity for priming respondents’ responses by first statements or “push polling”) we intentionally placed this item before any other descriptive or value-laden questions in the survey, unlike many other surveys we’ve studied. We also aimed for a balance within the two sides of the question, which we think fairly represents something of a cultural or individual view many people possess. Furthermore, we have employed this technique numerous times in five successive years of randomized statistical sampling for this topic, lending confidence that the results of this “forced choice” question about economic growth or consuming less is consistent with prior findings observed in statistically representative opinion sampling<sup>1</sup>:

**Q3.1 Which of these two statements comes closest to your view even if neither represents your view exactly (rotate choices): A. We need to grow the economy by consuming more goods & services. OR B. We'll be better off by consuming less and living more simply.**

<b>Response Category</b>	<b>N=692</b>
A. We need to grow the economy by consuming more goods and services.	12%
B. We'll be better off by consuming less and living more simply.	85%
C. Don't know	3%

This result conforms closely with fourteen prior studies where this question has been asked, both in statistical sample surveys in Oregon, as well as the three NW states and nationally by PI and other research organizations. Responses have varied between 74 – 88% agreement that we'd be better off by consuming less and living more simply.

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<sup>1</sup> A paper published in the professional journal *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy* about these methods and findings is available on request from PolicyInteractive.

As we have emphasized in presentations and journal articles, these findings represent more about attitude than actual behavior, knowing full well that well established evidence shows Americans to consume at disproportionately high levels compared to other industrial nations<sup>2</sup>. However, it is within this “attitude” context that issues of consumption, energy, economics and sustainability are intermixed and evaluated.

**Detailed nuance about consumption attitudes:**

**Q4: Thinking about the role of consumption in our economy, please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements.** (Items randomized in survey, shown here as descending rank order of “strongly agree”)

Response Category	Strongly Disagree	Lean toward Disagree	In-between	Lean toward Agree	Strongly Agree
Q4.7 Our consumption threatens our ecosystem.	5%	7%	9%	27%	53%
Q4.6 Our consumption levels lead to high consumer debt.	3%	6%	10%	36%	45%
Q4.3 Too much economic activity depends on disposables and waste.	4%	8%	14%	32%	42%
Q4.2 We should restructure our economy to lower emphasis on production and consumption of goods.	8%	13%	22%	33%	25%
Q4.8 Reducing consumption is difficult because we live in a consumer culture where we compare ourselves with others.	5%	13%	14	48%	21%
Q4.5 If everyone reduced their consumption, it would be an overall bad thing for our long term economy.	22%	21%	7%	33%	17%
Q4.1 Consumption is necessary for the growth and strength of our economy; it's not a bad thing.	12%	27%	32%	22%	8%
Q4.4 Reducing consumption would make life less enjoyable.	33%	42%	15%	8%	3%

**Commentary Q4:** As with all questions embedded within category matrices (such as question group 4, seen directly above), the items are randomized so as to eliminate order influence (each respondent gets the questions in a different randomized ordering). For purposes of readability we have rank ordered the responses so that the reader may observe the respective strength in descending order. A common survey problem is “agreement answering” bias which is not largely present here evidenced by the 80% agreement on Q4.7 and the 75% disagreement on Q4.4 and other items. It is especially interesting to observe the level of balance on Q4.5 that reducing consumption would be a bad thing for the economy, (50% agree; 43% disagree) in light of the 85% agreement on Q3 toward consuming less in general. Finally, the “big three” rationales seen in our consumption levels are clear: (1) impact on our ecosystem, (2) debt levels, and (3) waste flows. Available on request but not provided in this summary is information that self-reported conservatives are more motivated by the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> highest rationales rather than the top level of agreement.

**Thoughtful Intentions:** A prime topic of interest in examining the codependency of consumption and economic vitality as it relates to long-term sustainability is how our thinking processes construct both intentions and behavior outcomes. This next set of questions engages

<sup>2</sup> Twenty major world economies representing 80% of world gross product

respondents in self-reporting of intentions and behaviors toward making considered choices in daily decisions. Here, for rank ordering, we have combined the “frequently” and “almost always” reports of intentions and behaviors:

**Q5: For each item below, indicate how often it influences your decision to make a purchase:**  
(items randomized in survey; shown here descending order score as sum of “frequently” & “almost always”)

Response Category	Not at all	Rarely	Occasionally	Frequently	Almost Always	Don't know	Rank Score
Q5.12 Consideration of how long it will last (for durables).	.4%	1%	4%	35%	59%	1%	94
Q5.8 Weighing difference between "need" and "want".	1%	2%	11%	44%	42%	.8%	86
Q5.6 Reputation of the maker.	1%	3%	15%	48%	34%	.3%	82
Q5.11 Whether it will make my life more efficient or easier.	1%	2%	25%	50%	22%	1%	72
Q5.7 The comfort and convenience it will offer me.	1%	4%	31%	47%	17%	.1%	64
Q5.15 The time it will save me.	1%	8%	34%	45%	11%	.6%	56
Q5.5 Social (or labor) and environmental practices at place of origin.	6%	12%	31%	36%	14%	1%	50
Q5.2 The influence on global warming.	11%	13%	29%	31%	15%	1%	46
Q5.4 The raw materials of its production (mining, burning, cutting).	8%	18%	32%	30%	11%	1%	41
Q5.1 The amount of energy or fuel which goes into the production of the purchase.	7%	17%	35%	29%	10%	1%	39
Q5.3 The style and fashion of the item.	11%	22%	36%	24%	6%	1%	30
Q5.9 If it will make me more successful.	17%	27%	32%	17%	4%	2%	21
Q5.13 Staying on cutting edge of technology.	13%	33%	35%	15%	4%	.1%	19
Q5.14 The novelty and entertainment of new and exciting item or experience	13%	34%	37%	12%	2%	.3%	14
Q5.10 If a purchase will make me more liked by friends and family.	54%	34%	11%	1%	.1%	.3%	12

**Commentary Q5:** A basic precept in our attitude and behavior research is to recognize and work with existing attitudes, values and behaviors rather than to argue and convince people to change cherished notions. Thus, by studying high score responses on these measures of self-reported intentions we feel there is strength for cultural or social norms of beneficial sustainable activities. Here we see Q5 items 12, 8, 6 and 11 each representing an intention score above 75%, in descending importance of making purchase decisions: (1) durability, (2) “need” over “want”, (3) reputation of the source, and (4) ease and efficiency. The highest two, especially the second highest, represent key activation motivations for sustainability messages and behavior. It is also interesting to note that thoughtful decision-making motivations do not appear strongly activated by the term “global warming” in Q5.2 (46%) or the issue of energy inputs in Q5.1 (39%). In hindsight we admit a notable omission is consideration of the price of a product, however we are already quite familiar (from prior testing) that this is both a predominant behavioral factor in consumption decisions as well as subject to self-reporting error rooted in social desirability response error (i.e., not wanting to appear cheap). Nevertheless, in the future we will retain a “cost” indicator for reference purposes.

**Values as Motivation:** The role and identity of values in formation of daily behaviors has been contentious in the social sciences for decades. More recently evidence is mounting that

behaviors inform values more strongly than values inform behavior. More nuanced thinking can transcend this scientific debate as more of a complex dynamic between values, intentions, and behaviors, being highly variable by individual and circumstance. Here we take a circumspective examination of some stated expressions of attitudes and values acquired in the prior Bell+Funk focus groups and research literature on consumption, and test them in a broader population sample of our 692 citizens.

**Q6. To some people the term “Thoughtful Consumption” means some or all of the following:**

- Purchase only what you need,
- Share items with others,
- Purchase second-hand when possible,
- Purchase locally when possible,
- Carefully consider the environmental impacts of purchases.

Given this definition, how strongly do you agree or disagree on the scale below that “thoughtful consumption would lead to each of the following:

(Items randomized in survey; shown here in descending order of “Strongly Agree”.

Response Category	Strongly Disagree	Lean toward Disagree	Neither one way or the other	Lean toward Agree	Strongly Agree
Q6.10 Less waste	2%	2%	5%	30%	61%
Q6.13 A better life for future generations	3%	4%	8%	28%	58%
Q6.11 A good example for others	2%	3%	11%	37%	47%
Q6.12 Keeping Oregon beautiful	3%	3%	13%	36%	45%
Q6.3 A simpler life	4%	6%	15%	39%	37%
Q6.2 Reduced financial stress	4%	6%	11%	45%	36%
Q6.1 More financial security	9%	9%	21%	39%	29%
Q6.5 A happier life	5%	5%	23%	38%	29%
Q6.6 More time with family or friends	5%	8%	36%	30%	22%
Q6.7 More time to do new things, learn new things	5%	10%	31%	34%	20%
Q6.8 Working fewer hours	10%	17%	40%	22%	11%
Q6.9 Hurt business and economy	18%	29%	27%	22%	5%
Q6.4 A less exciting life	37%	28%	24%	9%	2%

**Q6 Commentary:** Once again we have ranked-ordered the responses, descending based on level of “strongly agree.” Ten out of the thirteen items showed above 50% combined agreement, six were above 75% combined agreement and two items were well above 50% for “strongly agree”; representing considerable evidence of reasons why lowering consumption would be beneficial to their values. Surprisingly unimportant to respondents were issues we thought would be ranked higher: the desire to work less (fewer hours), the concern about impacts on the economy, and the catch-all term “excitement” we observe as a motivator for consumption decisions.

**Consolidated Value Message Frame Test:** Pulling together a large amount of findings from the first statistical sample survey, other prior research, and the Bell+Funk citizen focus groups,

we then designed and tested five different meta-message frames on our 692 respondents. These statements were largely drawn from our focus group discussions. Thus, we aimed to use our 692 respondents as a test of our observations from our prior findings and to determine the overarching meaning of certain motivational narratives tapping into key citizen attitudes and values. The question form Q7 below as used in the survey hopefully explains the process. Here we show the aggregated final response tally in the template that the individual respondent would have entered their five preference votes.

**Q7. From focus groups of citizens we have heard five different reasons people give for being more thoughtful about the things they buy. These reasons are each summarized in the table below. We'd like your opinion about the relative strength of each of these statements. (Choices Rotate)**

**Instruction:** You have five votes to apply to the statements below. Each vote indicates a level of strength. You may distribute the votes anyway you wish. Simply enter the number of votes you assign to any single statement until your total reaches five. They may be relocated if you reconsider. For example, your scores in the boxes might indicate a “3”, “1” and “1”, meaning the “3” box is considerably stronger to you than the others.

**(Aggregate vote count in bold is total response, second response is EWEB address total, third is Eugene employee total).**

Results shown in order: Aggregated EWEB + City Employee (in bold font); EWEB Residential Customer; City Employee.	Assign 5 Votes in Boxes Below
<b>Future Generations:</b> We all have a responsibility to pass this place on to the next generation in at least as good a condition as we inherited it ourselves. Both our leaders and we our selves must do more to protect this planet for future generations.	<b>872</b> 527 345
<b>Live by Example:</b> Each and every one of us is a teacher by how we act. We need to set a good example for each other and our children by considerate and thoughtful behavior as it applies to care of the earth and equitable sharing of resources.	<b>630</b> 401 229
<b>Oregon Pride:</b> Oregon is a special place which has attracted people who care for the land and natural resources. We have long been a leader in green practices and we can leverage this reputation to set an example for other states. We need to continue to build on our leadership through smart environmental behavior.	<b>412</b> 265 147
<b>Waste Not:</b> Waste is a bad thing, and it is a by-product of thoughtless consumption. It is important to reduce the amount of waste we create by shifting behaviors to a more sustainable lifestyle and living more simply.	<b>735</b> 480 255
<b>Do the Right Thing:</b> I feel better about myself when I know I'm doing the right thing. Recycling, being careful to reuse things, and making purchases with thoughtfulness about consequences gives a sense of self-satisfaction.	<b>616</b> 352 264

**Note: If you don't think any of these statements will be effective, please skip this question.**

**Commentary Q7:** All message constructs show respectable strength. The two highest, in the top quartile of score distribution were our responsibility to “Future Generations” (872) and the perception that “Waste is a bad thing” (735). Observing divisive ideological issues on some cultural issues, we note strong non-partisan support for these two top issues, but this is not necessarily an essential point because we see partisan ideology playing a minor role in the larger results overall. While the results largely speak for themselves, we emphasize that these frames are by no means the definitive limits of value-based messaging. Moreover we are certain there are opportunities for re-mixing these frames, especially in light of overall support for each one. The main conclusion from this exercise is an affirmation of prior findings through a sequence of methodological steps regarding citizen values, attitudes, intentions and behaviors toward consumption.

**Concluding Commentary:** The findings are clearly not inclusive of attitudes and communicating about sustainable behaviors. Human values and behavior are extremely complex and diverse. We think we have tapped into some prior research findings and affirmed in this current project a culture-wide rethinking of a consumption paradigm embodied in our society of the last century or so. This could represent moving toward less consumptive and more pro-social values or it could be temporary and ephemeral since we recognize that circumstances today are highly dynamic and unpredictable. Perhaps this has always been so, but we do believe there are occasional periods of relative stability and other periods of dynamic change and only a more distant look back will clarify which period we are truly in. Policy leadership could leverage the attitudinal responses we have identified for more sustainable behaviors.

We always welcome feedback, questions and suggestions: [info@policyinteractive.org](mailto:info@policyinteractive.org)

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Appendix 1. Top-line Frequencies with Demographics  
Appendix 2. Political Ideology Cross-tabs to Variables